

Buddhist Self-Ordination ***A Dharma Strategy for the*** ***West***



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If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.

Linji (9th cent.)

Dedicated to His Holiness the Dalai Lama,
semen spirituale fecundans Occidentalium ovum

Preface

Note: This essay presents the views and attitudes of some Buddhist teachers or schools in the West, as well as the views and attitudes of some Western Buddhist students and practitioners to those teachers and schools. The author does not wish to imply that all Buddhist teachers or schools or that all Western Buddhists hold these views or attitudes.



The first Westerners to approach Buddhism, not merely as an academic curio but as a living faith, predated the contemporary arrival of Asian teachers by half a century. Most notable amongst these was Allan Bennett (Bhikkhu Ananda Metteyya), who progressed from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn – an influential English occult order

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that included Aleister Crowley¹ and William Butler Yeats – to Shaivite Yoga to Buddhism, studied in Sri Lanka, became fluent in Pali in six months, was ordained in Burma, mastered the Theravada and then led the First Buddhist Mission to the West in 1908. Bennett left behind an impressive body of Buddhist writings in English. Bennett's understanding of the Buddhadharma did not conflict with his English heritage. In a very real sense the Dharma Transmission to the West began with him, yet he is largely forgotten today.

Today, the popularity of Buddhism in the West is increasingly colonialist and imperious in principle, as Asian teachers and religionists vie with academics for the limelight. This is not entirely a bad thing. Grounding understanding and practice in tradition and academically accurate texts is important, but there is a downside as well. Traditions become mutually

1 Gerald Yorke, Aleister Crowley's chief disciple at the end of his life, was also the personal representative to the West of the Dalai Lama XIII. Yorke also wrote an introduction to an important secret book on the Kalachakra initiation.

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isolated and ossified as some teachers, themselves products of many different traditions, are committed to preserve the perceived purity of their personal tradition in an unfamiliar, diverse and multicultural environment by demanding absolute and rigorous adherence to cultural norms and attitudes that may or may not continue to be meaningful or suitable in the West or in the twenty-first century.

The West is being influenced by a brand of Buddhist colonial fundamentalism and evangelism in which Westerners may be followers but never leaders. To some the notion of a spiritually advanced Westerner seems absurd and self-contradictory, despite all evidence to the contrary, to the degree where we are required to memorize and perform the practices in languages not our own, and never dare question the teacher, even if our goal is respectful truth-seeking. Compare this to the Tibetan tradition of monastic didacticism, wherein monks debate the dharma with great earnestness, as the Buddha himself advised us to do.

I myself remember a woman in a well-known Buddhist group to which I once adhered who insisted that everything (not just the mantras) be recited in Tibetan,

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a language she did not understand. When I asked her why we could not perform the practices in English, so that we might better understand the meaning, with due respect for the mantras,² I was rudely told that the reason was that Tibetan is a “mystical language.” It never occurred to her that the Buddha himself did not know or speak Tibetan, and that the Tibetan scriptures are themselves translations of Pali and Sanskrit originals. At the same time we were not permitted to discuss or interpret the scriptures in group, or encouraged to study the dharma. Instead, we had to listen to brief readings from a popular book written by the founder, a prominent Tibetan lama. We were not even permitted to discuss the reading, for fear of encouraging erroneous views or creating conflict. In this way the richness of the dharma was entirely lost to us.

Such is the state of the Dharma Transmission to the West in some quarters today. Questioning and original

- 2 The mantras are “words of power” the very utterance of which is intrinsically efficacious and must therefore be pronounced impeccably in the language in which they are written. They are in fact strictly speaking untranslatable in any case.

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thought are not encouraged. One is expected to parrot the established norms that are almost always identified with an Asian lineage and teacher or teachers. Westerners are expected to accept all this without any independent thought or questioning at all and are put in the position of being mere passive receptacles of dharma. They have nothing of value to contribute in themselves, except perhaps financially. In my opinion this is a sign of decadence, not strength, and if one looks at history it is clear that this is not how Buddhism itself was transmitted. If one looks at the historical and geographical dissemination of the Buddhadharma, culminating in the famous Nalanda University, Buddhist teachings were collected, reflected upon, debated, practised, and refined, leading to the appearance of many realized masters, original Buddhist art, sculpture, new scriptures, new schools, lineages, and sects, all fecundating and cross-fertilizing each other over centuries.

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The famous Nalanda University (427–1197), one of the first great universities in recorded history, attracted scholars and students from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, Indonesia, Persia, Turkey, and Greece. The library was so vast that it burned for three months when it was set fire to by the Moslem invaders. At its height Nalanda had 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers. The school taught all subjects and included scholars from all Buddhist schools and sects, including Tantra. Tibetan Buddhism was heavily influenced by Nalanda

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University. At Nalanda University Buddhism was a living, breathing faith, not a fossilized museum exhibit as it is being taught today in the West.

The historical Buddha himself prophesied that the Buddhasangha would only flourish for 500 years, after which Buddhism would become decadent (this figure was subsequently revised upward as time passed). This is 500 years less than his original prophesy, due to the ordination of women. It follows therefore that monastic and popular religious Buddhism is decadent. From this in turn it follows that the true Buddhadharma is only to be found amongst those schools and teachers that do not follow the mainstream. This is basic logic.³

While we must treasure and honour the Asian Buddhist teachings that come to us, this does not mean that we should sacrifice our originality,

3 According to the *mapo* theory, the Buddhadharma will be fundamentally renewed and reinvigorated in the late 21st century (circa 2073 CE. This date is 2,500 years after the Enlightenment of the Buddha, based on the best current scholarship that places the Parinirvana of the Buddha in about 383 BCE).

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individuality, and independence as Westerners to these traditions, or allow ourselves to become locked into authoritarian and dogmatic regimes that exhibit all of the rigour and ossification of age, or to think that we have nothing meaningful to contribute in our own right. The Dharma Transmission to the West is not merely a process of transplanting Asian cultural practices to the West. It is not a one-way street. The Dharma Transmission to the West is also an opportunity for Buddhism itself to grow and expand and to be renewed and reinvigorated by the West, especially by our diversity, scholarship, critical philosophy, spirituality,

Buddhist Self-Ordination: A Dharma Strategy for the West and science.⁴ The Buddhism that emerges out of this process of cultural transmission and renewal will not be a fossilized remnant. It will be a vast, complex, dynamic, integrated, living, breathing network. The Buddhism that we are creating in the West, if it is anything at all, is in truth not Hinayana, Mahayana, or Vajrayana, but a Universal Way that includes, embraces, and transcends them all and exposes their

- 4 *The Buddha and the Robot: A Robot Engineer's Thoughts on Science and Religion*, by Masahiro Mori, is an excellent illustration of the mutual fructification of Buddhist thought and Western science. Mori, a Japanese computer scientist, one of whose students developed the famous ASIMO robot, explores the relationship between the Buddha-nature and artificial intelligence (AI) in this book. Mori is president of Mukta Research Institute. There are also numerous correspondences between Tantra and the psychedelic experience. For example, ethnobotanist Terence McKenna has remarked on the correspondences between the experiential world revealed by psychedelics and Mahayana Buddhism. Thanks to the Internet, in the foreseeable future all Buddhist writings in all languages will be available in an online database similar to www.archive.org, with instantaneous translation and powerful search capabilities. For the first time in history it will be possible to access, survey, and collate the sum total of Buddhist dharma using the methods of syncretism and logic.

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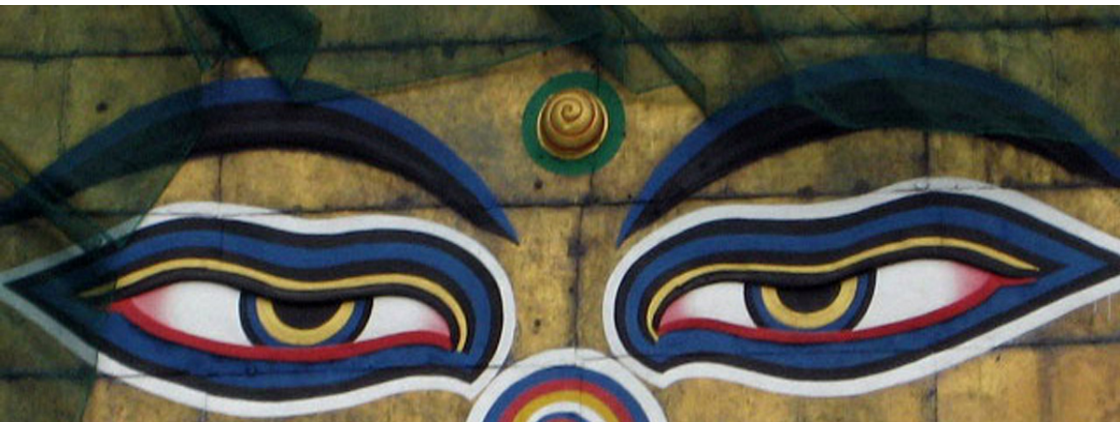
vital essence and spirit. At some point therefore we will have to break with tradition and establish our own Buddhist norms. The question arises, therefore, how is the Dharma Transmission to the West to be effected in a valid way? We find the answer, interestingly enough, in Buddhist history itself.

Buddhist self-ordination or Bodhisattva ordination is a Mahayana practice that originated with the Indian Queen Srimala. The Srimala Sutra was composed during the third century C.E. The formula of self-ordination was subsequently elaborated in the Buddha Net Sutra. The practice was commonplace in early China and later in Japan, especially in the sixth through eighth, twelfth through fourteenth, and seventeenth through nineteenth centuries C.E. Referred to as “Bodhisattva monks,” they are described as self-certified or self-ordained and self-enlightened or “enlightened without a teacher.” Many of the Bodhisattva monks were forest renunciates and eclectics, not specifically associated with any temple or school. The Tendai, Ritsu, Todaji, Zen, and Mukyoho Buddhist schools were all founded by self-ordained Bodhisattva monks. The formula of self-ordination is also practised in Tibet, where it is associated with the

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Mahasiddha and Ngakpa traditions (third through 13th centuries C.E.). Self-ordination is practised amongst the Theravadin forest renunciates as well.

The karmic benefits of taking the eight Mahayana precepts include a long, pleasurable, and peaceful life; a healthy body and mind; physical beauty and a pleasing personality; the respect of others; influence; intelligence; and adequate food.

The fundamental premise of self-ordination is the doctrine of the Tathagatagarbha, that each individual possesses within themselves the potent Buddha-potentiality. This is based on the utterance of the Buddha, “I never had any teacher or divinity to teach me or tell me how to gain enlightenment. What I achieved I did by my own effort, energy, knowledge and purity.” Therefore every individual possesses the capacity to become a Buddha within themselves without a teacher.



***Ordination of Purification and
Restoration
According to the Great Vehicle
(after the Tibetan)
Deer Park, Toronto, Canada -
June 11, 2011 CE***

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[Sunrise being nigh, awaken and wash, contemplating pain and the causes of pain, and thankful for the opportunity to seek awakening.

Approach the altar. Standing before the teacher, say:]

Taking Refuge

The Enlightened One is the teacher;

The teacher is the source of all good;

I go to the teacher for refuge.

The teaching of the Enlightened One is the teacher;

The teacher is the source of all good;

I go to the teacher for refuge.

The community of awakened ones too is the teacher.

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The teacher is the source of all good;

I go to all teachers for refuge.

Formulating the Intention to Awaken

I promise to seek awakening

Both for myself and for all conscious entities.

[Repeat three times.]

Consecration

May the universal ground be pure,

Free of all flaws,

As smooth as the palm of the hand,

Like lapis lazuli.

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Prayer to Magnify the Offerings

May these gifts, both human and divine,

**Including those both physically and mentally
presented,**

**Become voluminous clouds of offerings to the
Universal Sage [Samantabhadra],**

Permeating all space.

Cloud Offering Mantra

**Om namo Bhagavate Vajra Sara
Pramadane**

Tathagataya

Arhate Samyak Sambuddhaya

Tadyatha

Om Vajre Vajre



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Maha Vajre

Maha Teja Vajre

Maha Vidya Vajre

Maha Bodhicitta Vajre

Maha Bodhi Mando Pasamkramana Vajre

Sarva Karmavarana Vishodana Vajre

Svaha

[Repeat three times.]

The Power of Truth

I call on the Teacher, the Teaching, and the Taught;

I call on all enlightened beings and awakened ones;

I call on the two canons;

I call on the perfect, unutterable realization

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To infuse these gifts with the power of truth.

Invocation

[Light incense.]

Om Sustainer of all living beings

**Who dispels the obstacles with love that has
no limit,**

All-knowing.

Oh most holy ones, I beseech thy presence.



Prostrations

**[Prostrate three times, repeating the following three
times.]**

Om Namo Manjushiye

Namah Su Shriye

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Nama Zittama Shriye Svaha!

[Sit.]



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Homage to the Enlightened One

*I prostrate to the Teacher and the Founder; the
Powerful Transcendent Destroyer; the Utterly
Transcendent One; The Destroyer of the Enemy;
The Completely Perfected, Fully Enlightened One;
the Illustrious Conqueror, the Subduer from the
Shakya Family. Please inspire me!*

*I go for refuge to the Teacher and the Founder; the
Powerful Transcendent Destroyer; the Utterly
Transcendent One; The Destroyer of the Enemy;
The Completely Perfected, Fully Enlightened One;
the Illustrious Conqueror; the Subduer from the
Shakya Family. Please inspire me!*

*I offer myself to the Teacher and the Founder; the
Powerful Transcendent Destroyer; the Utterly
Transcendent One; The Destroyer of the Enemy;
The Completely Perfected, Fully Enlightened One;
the Illustrious Conqueror, the Subduer from the
Shakya Family. Please inspire me!*

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Seven Limb Prayer

Worshipfully I prostrate my body!

Worshipfully I prostrate my tongue!

Worshipfully I prostrate my mind,

**Presenting voluminous clouds of every kind
of gift, both physical and mental gifts.**

**I take responsibility for all my errors since
beginningless time**

**And celebrate the goodness of the awakened ones
and all beings.**

I implore ye to remain until the end of time,

Turning the wheel of truth for all that live!

**To thee I dedicate the goodness of myself and all
beings**

That all may achieve awakening!



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Long Mandala Offering⁵

Om Vajra Bhumi Ah Hum

Solid foundation of gold

Om Vajra Rekhe Ah Hum

Fence like diamond

Outside an iron wall

**In the centre Mount Meru, the king of the
mountainous,**

**In the East the continent the Land of the Tall
[Purva-Videha]**

**In the South the Land of Rose Apples
[Jambudvīpa]**

5 The mandala is a representation of the universe, offered to the Buddha or a teacher. One hundred thousand such offerings prepare the aspirant for Tantric practice. The mandala may be visualized or made.

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***In the West the Land of the Cattle Offerings
[Apara-Godaniya]***

In the North Uttarakuru

In the East the islands Deha and Videha

***In the South the Chowrie Lands [Chamara and
Upara-Chamara]***

***In the West the Lands of the Deceitful and the
Skilled in Mantra [Satha and Uttara-Mantrina]***

In the North the islands Kurava and Kaurava

In the East the precious mountain

In the south the wish-fulfilling tree

In the west the wish-fulfilling cow

In the north the unploughed harvest

***Here the precious wheel, precious jewel, precious
queen, precious minister, precious elephant, precious
horse, precious general and the great precious vase***

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**Here the graceful goddess, garland goddess, song
goddess, dance goddess, flower goddess, incense
goddess, light goddess, and the goddess of perfume.**

Here the sun and the moon

**Here the precious parasol, the banner of victory in
every direction**

**In the centre all human and divine riches, nothing
missing, pure and perfect**

**This excellent complete collection, I offer this
mandala to you, oh Great Compassionate One, and
to thee, Guru Rinpoche, together with your divine
following.**

**Please accept with your vast compassion these
offerings made by all transitory beings and on me and
all transitory originating conscious entities
everywhere in the universe, bless and inspire us!**

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Short Mandala Offering

I offer this place to the Enlightened One,
Glorious with flowers, incense, and perfume.
Mount Meru is the centre of the universe,
Four continents, sun and moon.
May all living beings rejoice in this world.

Inner Mandala Offering

I offer the objects of my clinging,
the objects of my malice,
the objects of my ignorance,
As friends, enemies, and strangers respectively,
Including my body, my wealth, and all my pleasures.
Without attachment I offer them all!

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Please accept these offerings and free me

From the three poisons.

Nam Guru Ratna Mandalakam Niryatayami

[Repeat three times.]

Prostration Mantra

[Kneel on the right knee.

Place the right palm on top of the left palm.]

***Om Namo Manjughriye Namah Sushriye Nama
Uttama Shriye Svaha***

***I ask the Enlightened Ones and the awakened ones
wheresoever situate to attend!***

***Just as those who having gone before, the awakened
ones, the complete and perfect Awakened Ones,
destroyers of the enemy, who, like the wise horse and
the great elephant, have done what was necessary;***

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have completed the tasks; have laid down the burden; have achieved their own good; have severed their bondage to becoming; possessed of perfect speech, well-liberated minds and well-liberated wisdom, have sworn the vow for the sake of all conscious entities, for the good of all beings, in order to liberate them, in order to eliminate hunger, in order to eliminate sickness and disease, so that the 37 aids to awakening may be perfected, and in order that the highest, most complete, and most perfect awakening shall be truly realized; so do I this day, I who am called [Name], from this moment hence and for [period of time], for the salvation of all conscious entities, in order to benefit them, in order to liberate them, in order to eliminate hunger, in order to eliminate sickness, so that the 37 aids to enlightenment may be perfected, and in order that the highest, most complete, and most perfect awakening may be truly realized, do swear.

Just as those who having gone before have destroyed the enemy in the past; abandoned all physical, verbal,

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**and mental imperfections, so do I, for the sake of all
beings, renounce all physical, verbal, and mental
imperfections, devoting myself wholly to the pure
practice of the work of awakening.**

[Repeat three times.]

Commitment Prayer to Keep the Precepts

I promise to abstain from causing harm.

I promise to abstain from illicit acts.

I promise to abstain from sex.

I promise to abstain from wrongful speech.

I promise to abstain from inebriants.

I promise to abstain from self-elevation.

**I promise to abstain from eating after noon and
before sunrise.**

I promise to abstain from all vain activities.

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**Like the awakened ones, I promise to renounce all
wrong actions,**

Attaining awakening soon,

**That the beings of the world, afflicted by pain, may
be freed from becoming.**

[Sit.]

Mantra of Righteousness

Om Amogha Shila Sambhara

Bhara Bhara

Maha Shuddha Sattva Padma Vibhushite Bhujā

Dhara Dhara

Samanta

Avalokite

Hum Phat Svaha

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[Repeat 21 times.]

May my actions be without fault

And perfect,

Pure and without pride.

[Prostrate three times.]

Dedication

May the sublime seed,

The unrealized intention to awaken,

Now manifest and grow,

Not decreasing

But ever increasing.

As a result of these right actions

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May all beings gain good and wisdom

Attaining the body of righteousness

And the body of wisdom.

Just as the courageous Gentle Glory [Manjushri]

and the Universal Sage [Samantabhadra]

Realized reality

I too commit whatever good I may produce

In the tradition of their perfect example.

I commit all these righteous roots

With the best commitment

**According to the victorious ones of past, present,
and future,**

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That I too may do righteousness.

[Finish with three prostrations.]

On the Relationship Between the Mahayana Precepts and the Vinaya

In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, recounting the last days of the Buddha, in his final exhortation to the Sangha, the community of monks, the Buddha made two statements concerning the Vinaya, the monastic rules of the Sangha, translated in these quotations as “Discipline” and “rules.”

For that which I have proclaimed and made known as the Dhamma and the Discipline, that shall be your Master when I am gone. ...

If it is desired, Ananda, the Sangha may, when I am gone, abolish the lesser and minor rules.

Because it did not occur to Ananda, to whom the Buddha was speaking, to ask which aspects of the Discipline were the lesser and minor rules, the Sangha at that time chose not to abolish any of them. The original 227 rules of the Vinaya, called the pratimoksha, are still followed by monks of the Theravada tradition. These are summarized in *The Manual of the Bhikkhu*, by Ven. Dhamma Sami, and include such rules as:

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- Not to accept carpets containing silk or made entirely from the wool of a black sheep
- Not to carry wool for more than three days
- Not to ask for a new bowl when one's existing bowl has less than five cracks
- Not to lie down in a building in which there is a woman
- Not to teach dhamma to women, someone holding an umbrella or a stick, a person wearing shoes or sandals, or a person in a vehicle, lying down, or wearing a head covering
- Not to leave a mattress or a chair outside
- Not to install oneself in a bed or on a chair placed on a floor with broken planks.
- Not to build a roof having more than three layers
- Not to tickle, or play in water
- Not to wash more often than twice a month

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- Not to make a needle, or cause one to be made
- Not to make a high bed, or cause one to be made
- When travelling through inhabited areas, to keep the gaze lowered and not to laugh, speak in a loud voice, lift one's robe, or swing one's arms, body or head, or place one's hands on one's hips, cover the head, or stand on tiptoes, or sit with one's arms wrapped around one's legs.
- Not to speak when one's mouth is full, or throw pieces of food into the mouth, or make noise or stick the tongue out while eating
- Not to urinate while standing

There are also many rules about the monk's robe, relations with nuns and lay women, teaching the dharma, and eating.

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Fundamentalism is a wrong view that is present in all religions and religious Buddhism is no exception.⁶ Some Buddhist fundamentalists seem to believe that the universe is a machine and that following the rules themselves are the means of liberation, much as certain Jews, Christians, and Moslems believe that by

- 6 Buddhism, properly understood, is not a religion. The English word “religion” refers etymologically to conduct indicating belief in a divine power, especially a state of life bound by monastic vows, characterized by devotional and ethical observances, from Latin *religio*, reverence for the gods. Buddhism specifically rejects theism in any form. The practices of Buddhism are not primarily devotional, and ethics are secondary as well. Buddhism is, moreover, not based on belief. The Buddha himself decried mere belief and instructed his disciples to test the validity of everything he said and did through the exercise of reason and direct experience. Buddhism, properly understood, is a spiritual philosophy that provides the practitioner first and foremost with the means of achieving spiritual self-perfection, and secondarily presents the resulting insights concerning the nature of the world, living beings, and spiritual experience itself to those who comprehend and follow the path laid out to the end. Thus, Buddhism is nothing less than the science of enlightenment, perfectly understood. As such, it is the most priceless treasure of mankind.

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following a set of prescribed rules they will be admitted to heaven when they die. The fundamentalist view is contradicted by the facts that the Vinaya did not always exist and that it evolved over the course of the Buddha's life, and the Buddha's own statement, made at the conclusion of his life, that the lesser and minor rules may be ignored. For these reasons monastic fundamentalism is an adharmic and erroneous view. The Vinaya rules are merely relative means, not the means of liberation in and of themselves. One may follow all of them and still be unenlightened, or worse.

Clearly many of these rules are historically determined and contingent. For example, the rules concerning water are contingent on the non-recognition by the science of the time that all water contains innumerable living organisms. Therefore, it is literally impossible to avoid taking life. If actually not killing was an objective requirement for enlightenment, not even the Buddha was enlightened, because existence itself involves killing, whether intentional or not. *The moment one realizes that the rules have to do with intention and not objective behaviour, one's view of the Vinaya is profoundly transformed.* This, however, is

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the correct, dharmic view, since dharma, being absolutely true, cannot contradict science.

At the same time, neither can we ignore the Vinaya entirely. The Buddha himself stated that the rules (along with the dharma) are the Master in his absence. For this reason the enlightened masters and saints of the Mahayana studied the Vinaya, and through that study identified the essential principles of the Vinaya that are truly binding upon the true disciple of Lord Shakyamuni. These are the eight Mahayana precepts:

1. Not killing
2. Not stealing
3. No sex
4. Not lying
5. No drugs
6. No high beds or seats
7. Not eating at the wrong time
8. No singing, dancing, music, perfumes, garlands, or ornaments

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When one studies the historical Vinaya texts in the context of the Mahayana tradition, one sees clearly that the Vinaya rules are simply elaborations of these eight essential principles. For example, “not killing” includes all of the following, which are all separately itemized in the Vinaya:

- Not to dig in the earth
- Not to destroy plants
- Not to pour water containing insects on the ground, or use water containing living things
- Not to watch an army departing for combat, sleep amongst an armed troop, for watch military activities
- Not to kill animals

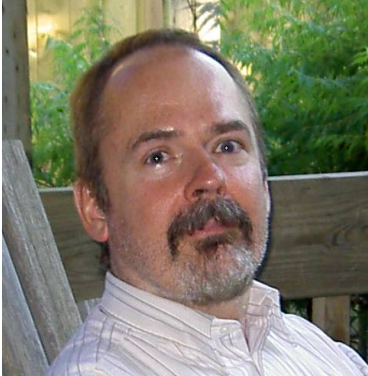
And so on. To itemize them all would go beyond the scope of this essay. The earnest student should discover these for himself.

Even the Mahayana precepts are contingent and relative, however. One theme that recurs in the Vinaya is exceptions made if one is sick or curing sickness.

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For example, the original rule concerning alcohol was subsequently extended to all drugs, with the exception of drugs taken as medicines. It is apparent from the wording of this rule that its original intention was to avoid clouding the mind and impairing judgement. Since we now know that alcohol has medicinal properties, drinking two glasses of wine per day, but not to the point of intoxication, for the sake of one's health, probably does not violate the precepts. Similarly, ordained followers of the Ngakpa or householder tradition and other Mahayana and Tantric traditions, including priests, are permitted to marry, the prohibition on sexual activity really being a prohibition of licentiousness and promiscuity. In Tantra loving sexuality can even be a means of liberation. In the Tibetan Mahasiddha tradition, some practitioners consume drugs like cannabis in the pursuit of meditation. Some great lamas have consumed alcohol. At least several lamas today are gay. Things are not always as they appear to others, and more complex.

About the Author



Alexander Duncan is a consultant and writer living in Deer Park, Toronto, Canada. He has been a keen student of Buddhism for over 30 years. Alex is a Buddhist eclectic in the Tantric Mahasiddha and Ngakpa traditions of Tibet and a practitioner of Dzogchen meditation. Alex accepted the Mahayana vows of a Bodhisattva monk on June 11, 2011 C.E., wherein he identified Padmasambhava as his spiritual teacher. He may be seen in the local ravines and parks practising dzogchen, either alone or with others who care to join him.